Critique of J. L. Austin’s Speech Act Theory:
Decentralization of the Speaker-Centered Meaning in Communication

YOSHITAKE Masaki
(Fukuoka University of Education)

Abstract. The paper examines J. L. Austin’s Speech Act Theory in terms of the dialogical nature of communication and decentralizes the speaker-centered meaning in communication. After reviewing the outlook on the main arguments of *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin, 1962), I clarify that the Use Theory of Meaning contributes to critique the failure of the referential theory of meaning. After describing Grice and Strawson’s responses to Austin’s concept of convention, I conduct my own critiques to Austin’s Speech Act Theory. My main insistence is that the Speech Act Theory employs the speaker-centered model when the meaning of acts is conceptualized. In such a model, the dialogical nature of communication, listener’s meaning, and the multiplicity of interpretations are downgraded. Furthermore, two other problems that result from the decentralization of meaning are articulated. One is concerned with an ontological issue on convention. Although convention is often treated as a static entity, it is rather dynamic construct realized throughout the use of language. The other problem is related to an epistemological issue. It is indubitable that no one but speaker can possess a direct access to his or her own meaning of illocutionary acts. I urge that the illocutionary act is identified only *a posteriori* based on the meaning of the perlocutionary act in each participant. This principle should be applied to the research setting because researchers also make inference of speech acts in the observing communication phenomenon. In order not for social scientific theories to be swallowed by the sensitivity of the times, more efforts should be made to regain humanity from technology. This critique is meant to be one of such attempts.

INTRODUCTION
Philosophers who give serious thought to language have been traditionally concerned with truth and falsehood of utterance. It has been long believed that humans are “rational” beings that can explain the meaning of language by mathematical logic. It is John Langshaw Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) that sheds light on the “use” aspect of language
and shifts philosophical arguments more to ordinal language. The present paper aims at examining Austin's Speech Act Theory in terms of the dialogical nature of communication and decentralizing the speaker-centered model of meaning in communication. To clarify, I mean by “decentralize” to avoid prioritizing the speaker’s meaning by integrating the listener’s meaning into the Speech Act Theory and regarding communication as dialogue. To begin with, I will summarize the main arguments of How to Do Things with Words, followed by the identification of Austin’s main contribution. After describing Grice and Strawson’s responses to Austin’s concept of convention, I will conduct my own critiques to Austin’s Speech Act Theory.

OVERVIEW OF SPEECH ACT THEORY

The underlying theme behind Austin’s philosophy is that a statement not only describes a situation or states some facts, but also performs a certain kind of action by itself. The tradition to view a statement as a mere description of state or fact has been pursued by a number of philosophers for a long period of time. In this way of thinking, each statement itself should hold either truth or falsehood. For instance, the sentence “You have a wonderful smile” is in one sense either true or false in light of the real world, namely whether the person really has a wonderful smile or not. Yet, Austin points out that this utterance is more than mere description and statement: It does things on its own. The sentence “You have a wonderful smile” can function depending on contexts as praise, telling irony, or even asking for money in a certain situation.

To start with, Austin suspects that philosophers had been neglecting the utterance-as-action aspect, which he categorizes as “performative sentence” or “performative utterance.” Austin presents some cases in which an utterance functions as action: admitting to accept a woman as one’s wife by saying, “yes, I do,” in the wedding ceremony; or naming a ship the Queen Elizabeth by saying, “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth,” with a bottle smashed against the stem. Proposing that uttering a sentence includes actually doing things, Austin makes a distinction between constative and performative: The former is an utterance-as-description view and the latter is an utterance-as-doing view.

Performative utterance is not a matter of being “true” or “false,” which are believed to be the characteristics of description and statement, according to Austin (1962). To suggest this point, Austin quotes the wedding example again and insists that “here we should say that in saying these words we are doing something—namely, marrying, rather than reporting something, namely that we are marrying” (p. 13). Instead of the true-false dichotomy, Austin introduces “the doctrine of the Infelicities,” defined as “the doctrine of the things that can be and go wrong on the occasion of such utterances” (p. 14, italics removed).

In order to explain the doctrine of the infelicities, Austin first classifies infelicities into two features. The first category is “misfires.” Misfires are infelicitous cases in which an act is purported but it is of no effect. Among misfires, Austin separates “misinvocations” from
“misexecutions.” In misinvocations, the purported act is not allowed. In other words, conventions of that performed act must exist. An example case of misinvocation is “misapplication,” which is an act, for instance, of christening a penguin—there is no convention of christening animals. While misinvocations do not possess their conventions, misexecutions do have their conventions: However, some mistakes occur in the process of its execution and lead to the failure of the execution. “Flaw” is one type of misexecution, an inappropriate execution in which, e.g., one utters “my house” when he or she actually possesses two houses. “Hitches” is another type, an incomplete, rather than inappropriate, execution in which a woman announces her intention not to marry her fiancé during her wedding ceremony.

The other category of the doctrine of the infelicities, according to Austin (1962), is “abuses.” Compared to misfires, abuses are concerned with a speaker’s feeling, intention, and continuous action. One example is a case in which one says, “I congratulate you,” despite feeling unhappy or unpleasant. Another example is that when one says, “I promise to show up at five,” he or she actually needs to show up at five. Here exist “insincerity,” “infraction,” and “beach.” Figure 1 is a summary of infelicities provided by Austin (the original figure is p. 18).

![Figure 1: Summary of Infelicities](image)

As an alternative to the study on meaning, Austin (1962) calls for “the doctrine of illocutionary forces” (p. 99), that focuses on the performative linguistic function in which speech is regarded as action. Naming it in this way, Austin insists on the need to group speech acts into three ways. The first category is a locutionary act. This is an act of constructing an utterance by following grammars and vocalizing the sentence. For example, if a person says to you, “You can’t do that,” the locutionary act is to construct a sentence that literally means that you cannot do that by making relevant physical sounds. It is followed by the second category, an illocutionary act. In this act, one actually performs an act in uttering the sentence. In the same example, the illocutionary act is to prohibit you from doing that. The third category is a perlocutionary act, which one tries to accomplish by uttering it. That is, by saying the sentence, he stopped you from doing that.
Among locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, Austin (1962) especially focuses on the importance of illocution and extends his analysis by making a distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts: "Illocutionary acts are conventional acts: perlocutionary acts are not conventional" (p. 120). In order to perform an illocutionary act, the speaker must rely on the socially accepted convention without which the speaker cannot inspire a social force into his or her utterance. In other words, it is conventional "in the sense that at least it could be made explicit by the performative formula" (p. 103). On the other hand, a perlocutionary act is an effect of the illocutionary act. "The consequential effects of perlocutions are really consequences, which do not include such conventional effects as, for example, the speaker's being committed by his [sic] promise (which comes into the illocutionary act)" (p. 102). This distinction is reflected in whether a person performs an act "in" saying or "by" saying. In an illocutionary act, "In saying I would shoot him I was threatening him," and in a perlocutionary act, "By saying I would shoot him I alarmed him" (p. 121).

In the end, Austin reaches the bold conclusion that a description of situations or a statement of facts is merely one type of illocutionary force. This means that truth and falsehood, which had been long argued by traditional philosophers, are a form of language to represent general views in order to provide such an evaluation that something is right, wrong, adequate, or inadequate, with intentions and purposes, for audiences in specific situations. That is to say, truth and falsehood are concerned with not only meanings of words but also, more importantly, what kinds of acts are performed in what kinds of situations.

To conclude, Austin (1962) presents five general classes of illocutionary forces of utterances, including verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives. Verdictives can be observed when juries, mediators, or judges, for instance, are giving a verdict. They also include "estimate, reckoning, or appraisal" (p. 150). Exercitives are related to executions of right, authority, and influence, such as order or designate. Commissives are those by which the speaker is obliged to do some acts by uttering the sentence, e.g., promise or intend. Behabitives are concerned with attitudes and social behaviors, such as congratulate or curse. Expositives clarify the way utterances fit the proceedings of conversation or arguments, including describe, accept, or explain.

The main theses explained above can be identified in other writings by Austin (1979a). The article, Performative Utterances (Austin, 1979b), directly deals with the issue of performatives and poses questions toward the traditional philosophical tendency to focus on descriptions. He also presents a basic form of the theory of the infelicities and its categorization. In Other Minds, Austin (1979c) is trying to answer the epistemological question “How do we know?” from the standpoint of the ordinary language school. It seems that this idea is the beginning of his focus on performatives. In Ifs and Cans, Austin actually applies his way of analysis to the case of if-clause (Austin, 1979d). The sentence which contains if-clause was traditionally thought of as representing logic. However, here Austin
points out that if-clause rather relies on intention or attempt of the speaker. He also refers to the importance of free will. Throughout these works and other writings, Austin meets challenges from other scholars, develops his own thesis by encountering these challenges, and establishes the solid baseline of the ordinary language school tradition, alternative to the traditional statement-as-description approach.

CONTRIBUTION OF SPEECH ACT THEORY

Before critiquing the Speech Act Theory, I would like to articulate a main contribution that Austin made by presenting the theory. That is, Austin successfully situates the argument on “meaning” into the use perspective. Strongly influenced by the tradition of logos in Western philosophy, the argument concerning meaning had been founded on the referential theory of meaning, which assumes the linguistic system that connects the signifier with the signified. It is Austin that went beyond the referential theory and that considered the context in which language was actually used.

Stainton (1996) classifies the theory of meaning into three views: the Thing Theory, the Idea Theory, and the Use Theory. The Thing Theory argues that “meaningfulness lies (roughly) in the relations between symbols and external objects of various kinds” (p. 29). Employing the Thing Theory, Russell (1996) clearly asserts:

The sense of reality is vital in logic, and whoever juggles with it by pretending that Hamlet has another kind of reality is doing a disservice to thought. A robust sense of reality is very necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects. (p. 209)

On the other hand, the Idea Theory insists, “the meaning of a symbol is what one mentally grasps in understanding it,” assuming “meaning comes, initially, from ‘inside the mind’—rather than directly from objects ‘in the world’” (Stainton, 1996, p. 30).

The Thing Theory and the Idea Theory are based on the assumption that a language is a set of rules that connect the signifier and the signified, whether the signified is thing or idea. For instance, in Japanese, the signifier inu means a dog or a concept of dog. Saussure (1983) identifies such a pure linguistic system in the speaker’s consciousness, extracts it from non-linguistic factors, and calls it “langue.” Although Saussure recognizes the importance of “parole (speech),” parole is considered private and therefore secondary in the sense that it is a mere execution of language. As a result, it is often urged that langue is a referential system that enables the signifier and the signified to be connected. It is today’s tendency to treat language as such a system detached from and available to human beings, although it is not Saussure’s insistence that langue own such an existent entity.

The Use perspective, nevertheless, discloses that the referential theory of meaning fails because it is through the usage of the word that the meaning of word arises in a real life situation. Suppose that there is a table in front. If someone with a knife broke into the room, you might “use” the table to protect yourself. In such a case, you would call the table “the
shield.” On the contrary, you enter the forest and find a tree stump. If you “used” the stump to read a book at, you would call the stump “table.” These thought experiments indicate that a table is signified by the word “shield” while the word “table” refers to a tree stump. In this context, the referential system that “table” refers to a table or an idea of table cannot stand. Rather, it is how the word “table” is used or how the table is used in a specific context that determines the meaning of the word. In other words, the rules of such a referential system cannot be a priori fixed; and even if it could, the rule would signify the mere abstracted meaning.

Wittgenstein (1953/2001) provides crucial critiques on the referential theory of meaning. Firstly, Wittgenstein argues that language cannot be a linguistic “rule” of the signifier and the signified because, if so, we would need another rule that connects the statement of the rule with what the rule signifies. For instance, suppose there is a rule that connects a signifier “book” with a book (or an idea of book). In order for this rule to stand, there should be another rule, a higher-level rule, that connects what the sentence “the word book means a book (or an idea of book)” signifies, on one hand, with what is signified by the sentence “the word book means a book (or an idea of book),” on the other hand. In this logic, there is no end point to anchor the referential rule.

In addition, Wittgenstein (1953/2001) articulates the importance of context to determine the meaning. In order to understand what an utterance means, one needs to be in a specific context where a certain language game is in effect. A well-known example used in an intercultural context is the meaning of the maxim “a rolling stone gathers no moss.” In Japanese, it means that one cannot become mature if he or she changes the place too often where he or she belongs, assuming that “moss” has a positive connotation. On the other hand, in English, it means an opposite, assuming that “moss” has a rather negative connotation. As Wittgenstein insists that “the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form” (p. 10; emphasis removed), the meaning is deeply rooted to such a value system in one’s life or “language game.”

The aforementioned critiques are rather philosophical arguments than empirical arguments. Austin (1962) provides an analytic framework that regards language as not a referential rule, but rather exists as a set of actions. The classification of locution, illocution, and perlocution is his attempt to deconstruct such a static referential theory that is logically constructed without contexts. The value of Austin’s Speech Act Theory can be identified in this context.

Austin relies on the concept “convention” to depict an illocution-perlocution distinction, as described in the overview. For Austin, illocutionary acts are based on the existence of convention, while perlocutionary acts are not. Against this convention-non-convention distinction, Grice and Strawson make critical arguments, rejecting this distinction and attempting to explain in terms of “intention.”
CRITIQUE OF “CONVENTION” BY GRICE AND STRAWSON

Discussing “meaning,” Grice (1996) distinguishes between “natural meaning” (signified as meaningN) and “non-natural meaning” (meaningNN). A difference can be identified in terms of whether or not there is a “natural” connection between utterance and what is meant by the utterance, in that “non-natural” meaning does not possess a natural connection. For example, “the fact that light is on means that electricity is working” is “natural” because light needs electricity to be on. On the other hand, “the fact that light is on means that he is still studying” is “non-natural” because he might be just watching TV or reading a magazine, not studying.

By making the above-mentioned distinction, Grice declares, “‘A meantNN something by x’ is roughly equivalent to ‘A uttered x with the intention of inducing a belief by means of the recognition of this intention’” (p. 89; emphasis added). Martin (1987) summarizes Grice’s argument, stating “the meaning of a language token consists in its intentional use by the speaker to accomplish her desire to get the hearer to do something by revealing to the hearer that the speaker has this intention” (p. 85).

Based on Grice’s conception of non-natural meaning and the integration of intention, Strawson (1969) conducts a critique on Speech Act Theory. Strawson views speech acts as not necessarily dependent on conventions that function as connecting factors between utterance and what is meant by it. In other words, a person can act without using an existing convention all the time in order to perform an act by saying something. Instead, the contention by Strawson as well as Grice is that it is “intention” that takes a role of acting by saying something. Strawson phrases it in the following way.

S non-naturally means something by an utterance x if S intends (i1) to produce by uttering x a certain response (r) in an audience and intends (i2) that A shall recognize S’s intention (i1) and intends (i3) that this recognition on the part of A of S’s intention (i1) shall function as A’s reason, or a part of his reason, for his response r. (pp. 386-387)

Here Strawson rejects the illocution-perlocution distinction that is based on the existence of conventions and presents three layers of intentions like above.

DECENTRALIZATION OF THE SPEAKER’S OWNERSHIP OF MEANING

I have so far depicted the Speech Act Theory proposed by Austin (1962) and the critiques made by Grice (1996) and Strawson (1969). While Austin makes a distinction between illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts in terms of conventionality, Grice and Strawson diminish this distinction and explain the speech act in terms of intention. My argument is that the problem of Austin, Grice, and Strawson is that all of them rely on the speaker-centered model of meaning in communication, which downgrades the listener’s meaning and the dialogical communication process. In this section, I will critique the Speech Act Theory in order to decentralize the speaker-centered meaning.
Speaker-centered Model of Speech Act

Traditionally, Speech Act Theory has been speaker-oriented because it emphasizes the speaker’s influence on the listener, or the speaker’s strategic move based on intention. Austin (1962), Grice (1996), and Strawson (1969) all regard action as something that one endangers. For these philosophers, making an utterance to perform an act is always involved in speaker’s strategies to fulfill his or her intention. When Grice and Strawson refer to intention, they mean that of the speaker. Three types of intentions, e.g., $i_1$, $i_2$, and $i_3$ (see the earlier quotation of Strawson), are all defined from the viewpoint of the speaker. Although the existence of the listener is considered (characterized as $A$), this listener is defined as if it were an object that is supposed to respond to $S$'s utterance like a machine, not a subject like the speaker. In other words, their explanation about intention is founded upon the ego- or speaker-centered view of meaning.

Austin similarly stands on the speaker’s point of view to conceptualize speech acts. It seems that the theory consists of following assumptions. First of all, there exists a dissociated speaker who utters a sentence with a certain purpose or intention to cause an intended effect in the listener. In order to actualize this effect, the speaker refers to conventions in saying the utterance so that he or she hopefully succeeds to realize what is intended. After all, by saying it, the intended effect might or might not be actualized. This is based on the linear view of communication: Speaker [intention] $\rightarrow$ Convention $\rightarrow$ (encode) $\rightarrow$ Utterance $\rightarrow$ (decode) $\rightarrow$ Listener $\rightarrow$ Effect [Unconventional]. Figure 2 summarizes the speaker-centered meaning of the speech act and the difference between Grice and Strawson on one hand and Austin on the other.

Limit of the Speaker’s Ownership of Meaning

By drawing a boundary between illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts, the limitation of the speaker’s right to determine the meaning of his or her utterance is implied. Indeed, Austin (1962) clearly presupposes the embedded gap between the execution of illocution and the actual effect.

Since our acts are acts, we must always remember the distinction between producing effects or consequences which are intended or unintended; and (i) when
the speaker intends to produce an effect it may nevertheless not occur, and (ii) when he does not intend to produce it or intends not to produce it it may nevertheless occur.

(p. 105)

That is to say, the actual effect always contains a possibility that the effect might be different from what the speaker intends, or perlocutionary acts are beyond the speaker’s intention or out of his or her control. In this sense, what the concept of convention implies is that there is something that the speaker cannot do anything in terms of the determination of the meaning of his or her utterance. To concretize such a sphere that is out of the speaker’s control, consider two following cases.

Suppose that a male student, John, goes to a party with his female friend, Mary, who loves John. But John does not notice that Mary has such feelings for him. At the party, John finds one girl dancing in the center of the floor. John is sure that he met her before, but cannot remember when and where it was. Intending to ask Mary who she is, John says to her, “I wonder who she is.” Mary thinks that John is attracted to the woman, so she feels upset. Because Mary does not want John to know what she feels, she simply says, “Well, I don’t know.” Let us see another case. A couple is about to eat dinner and both husband and wife sit at the table. But the husband notices he does not have a fork, and says, “Oh, I don’t have a fork.” Although the husband does not mean anything by this statement, the wife stands up and takes a fork for him.

Austin’s terminologies are not satisfactory to depict the two cases stated above. In the first case, the statement “I wonder who she is” is locution, asking Mary to let John know is illocution, and disturbing Mary is perlocution, even though it is not what is intended, nor is it a direct effect of the illocution. Speech acts in the second case can be described as such: the statement that I do not have a folk is location, yet the asking to bring a folk to the husband is not illocution because it is not intended, and the wife’s action to bring a folk to him would be perlocution if the asking to bring a folk were the illocution. In the first case, the attribution of different meaning results in misunderstanding. The second case involves the receiver’s attribution of different meaning or intention to the utterance. Although such a misattribution and an unexpected effect are natural consequences in communication, what is actually happening between participants in these communication situations is so complicated that the speaker-centered speech act theory obviously cannot capture the dynamics of speech acts. As the aforementioned quotation indicates, Austin clearly recognizes possible miss-executions and unintentional effects of the illocutionary act. Nevertheless, Austin fails to incorporate this “gray” area thoroughly into his theory of speech act.

The performance of acts by saying an utterance must involve someone who interprets the utterance. Since humans are ever-interpreting beings, they never cease attaching their own meaning to such incoming stimuli as someone’s utterances and behaviors, events, and environments where one is situated. Even one message or utterance can be interpreted in various ways, where attaching different meanings and misunderstanding commonly take
place. Differently stated, speaker’s intention and listener’s interpretation does not necessarily correspond to each other in nature. It is simply accidental that they agree so that there is no particular inconsistency between participants’ meanings and resultant perlocution. Rather, it is not unnatural that speaker and listener do not accord in terms of meaning, in that arises inconsistency.

In total, there is no essential reason why the speaker’s meaning is more privileged than that of the listener, because both the speaker and the listener are equally active participants of communication. By giving priority only to the speaker concerning the ownership of meaning, the listener is reduced to a mere passive decoder of the message, located out of the speaker’s meaning system. Communication is dialogical in nature. Speech Act Theory has to integrate this dialogical nature of communication when it conceptualizes speech acts.

In order to refine the articulation of self-centricity in the Speech Act Theory, the ownership of meaning by speaker needs to be decentralized by being exposed to the glance of the listener. In the sense that communication is dialogical rather than monological, the meaning of an utterance is open to multiple interpretations. The speaker does not possess an ownership to determine what his or her utterance means, while the listener also joins the process of meaning creation. Therefore, the same utterance can be interpreted in various ways, depending on listener’s past experiences, present moods and interests, or future concerns. Inevitable revisions to be made in the Speech Act Theory are, therefore, to admit the existence of otherness that the speakers cannot help encountering in determining the meaning of his or her utterance and to situate the Speech Act Theory into a decentralized dialogical communication process.

REFINEMENT OF THE ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF CONVENTION

My main argument unfolded in the previous section is that the Speech Act Theory is constructed on the base of the speaker-centered meaning in communication. After pointing out the multiplicity of interpretation and the dialogical nature of communication, I have urged the necessity to decentralize the speaker’s ownership of meaning and integrate the listener’s meaning into the theory. Now some problems as a result of the deconstruction have to be clarified and refined. One of the problems to be repaired is related to convention.

Conventionality in Dialogue

Austin employs the concept of convention to make a distinction between illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts. Although Austin argues that illocutionary acts are conventional, it is arguable whether there must be a convention to exercise an illocutionary act. In other words, is an illocutionary act always conventional? Indeed, Austin is right in that illocutionary forces can be created by relying on the existence of a particular convention in many cases. For instance, a convention enables one to appoint someone in saying “I will appoint you to be chairman.” Unless such a convention existed, his or her statement, “I will
appoint you to be chairman," would not function properly.

The essential question is then: What “convention” means to the listener. Now that Austin’s Speech Act Theory is decentralized, convention is not merely a matter of the speaker but that of the listener. Because it is illocution that is conventional, the identification of illocutionary act is also of our concern. Although the following usage of “illocution” and “convention” precisely is not consistent with Austin’s conceptualization, let me illustrate the complexity of conventionality in the dialogical communication by referring to the two cases I have introduced earlier.

In the first case, John asked Mary about a woman. Without any intention, John disturbed Mary because Mary thought John meant that he was interested in that woman, despite the fact that John’s intended illocution is to ask Mary if she knows the girl. John never uses any convention to disturb Mary from John’s standpoint, while John executed the illocution that caused disturbance to her from Mary’s standpoint. The second case is a talk on folk between husband and wife. In this case, the husband does not intend the wife to bring a folk for him. In spite of his intention, in fact, the wife does. The husband does not follow any convention to let the wife to bring a folk for him, whereas the wife might recognize the illocution of her husband asking him to bring a folk.

In the dialogical context, as observed in the two cases, “the existence of conventions of particular languages not a necessary condition for the performance of speech acts in general” (Searle, 2002, p. 152). Grice and Strawson are right in this regard. Truly, it is still possible to identify an illocutionary act and a perlocutionary act from the speaker’s perspective. Nonetheless, the utility of the concept of convention is not as effective as it seems when identified in the dialogical context. Then, what is convention in illocutionary acts should be scrutinized.

Dynamics of Convention

Convention is not required for illocutionary acts to be exercised. Yet I insist that the concept of convention is inevitable to explicate the mechanism of meaning-making process: When the speaker is conscious of his or her illocutionary act, the speaker certainly utilizes a convention in the execution; and, for the listener to interpret the illocution of the speaker, the listener cannot help relying on a certain schema already given to him or her. In such a case, what is the convention like? In other words, what is the ontological base of convention?

In the sense that convention is depicted as something “used” to refer to speaker’s intention, convention is treated as a set of linguistics rules available for an instrumental purpose. Adhering to Austin’s view that illocutionary acts are conventional and perlocutionary acts are non-conventional, Searle (1969) replaces the concept of conventionality with that of “rule-governed.” The goal of the theory of Speech Act, according to Searle, is to delineate rules enough to make illocutionary acts possible. Such a rule perspective contains an instrumental view because convention is thought of as an instrument to connect what the speaker intends (the signified) with what is actually uttered (the
signifier). If so, here arise again the same problems as the referential theory of meaning that I have illustrated: (1) an additional one-level-higher rule is needed to connect what the rule means and what the rule states, and (2) a meaning cannot be determined without considering how the language is used in a specific context.

In order to avoid the referential problems, convention must not be such static rules that exist independently of human agents and that simply connect the intention with the utterance. Instead, convention has to be a dynamic concept. This is exactly what the Use Theory discloses: Meaning arises in terms of how the language is used in a specific context and must be actualized each time. The early example of how the meaning of the word “table” changes depending on how to use it illustrates this point. To believe that the word “table” means a table neglects the use of language in a specific context and simply abstracts it. In other words, even such a lexical meaning is a mere abstracted meaning averaged and crystallized as a result of repeated use. Heidegger (1971) calls such a systematized meaning “metalinguage,” insisting, “metalinguistics is the metaphysics of the thoroughgoing technicalization of all languages into the sole operative instrument of interplanetary information” (p. 58). Therefore, the Use Theory of Meaning actually explicates that the abstracted meaning, which is the referential system, is founded on or must keep being grounded upon the repeated use of language that takes place each time in a specific context.

Because convention is a langue-like rule externalized through parole, it is required to articulate the role that parole plays in the emergence of convention. It is true that parole necessitates langue to be practiced, if we strictly follow Saussure (1983). It should be confirmed, nonetheless, that parole is possibly not a mere use of langue. As indicated in the phenomenology of parole deployed by Merleau-Ponty (1990), parole actively gives a foundation for langue to exist. Without parole, in other words, there is no langue-like structure because meaning is in fact actualized not because of referential rules but because of the use of language in a specific context each time. Therefore, the fact that parole needs langue and the fact that parole actualizes langue are the two sides of the same coin, and the latter fact tends to be neglected in the discussion about meaning.

The Structuration Theory clarifies the aforementioned dynamics. Giddens (1979) explicates such dynamics of the structure in which subjects and an emergent structure interact. Subjects are not completely free agents in that their actions are always constrained to a certain degree by existing social customs. And yet it is subjects’ actions that create and reproduce such structures. Bourdieu makes the exactly same point with his notion of habitus, which he describes as “structured structures” and “structuring structures” (1977, p. 72). As indicated, convention is a dynamic structure realized through dialogical communication, which means that convention is an intersubjective construct.

In sum, the structure of convention is not static in the way that conventional rules are used in order to produce an illocutionary act. But the structure should be dynamic and realized, actualized, or made existent through the use of language in dialogical
communication. This is similar to “hermeneutic circle” (Gadamer, 1989) in the sense that the whole and the parts are interdependent. When convention is used in the production of illocutionary acts, the structure of convention must be such a dynamic structure that cannot be separated from human agents and results of actions. The aforementioned dynamics in structure of convention is summarized in Figure 3.

![Figure 3: Dynamics of the Structure of Convention](image)

**REFINEMENT OF THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF ILOCUTIONARY ACT**

While the first problem that arises as a result of the decentralization of the speaker-centered model is on convention, the second problem is concerned with the way that the listener or researchers identify the speaker’s illocutionary acts in dialogical communication. No doubt the speaker has a direct access to his or her awareness and experience. Nonetheless, the indubitable fact is that the second or the third person cannot directly access speaker’s awareness. This is why Husserl (1964) cannot help starting the analysis from one’s consciousness in his phenomenology. To articulate the complexity to understand other’s psychological state, following Husserl, Schutz (1970) states:

His [other’s] body, like all other material objects, is given to my original perception or, as Husserl says, in originary presence. His [sic] psychological life, however, is not given to me in originary presence but only in copresence; it is not presented, but appresented. (p. 164)

Because otherness is always embedded between participants, an attempt to know the speaker’s illocutionary act is possible in principle only through making inference based on what emerges in the consciousness of the second or third person, as Schutz argues, “the comprehension of the other person occurs merely by appresentation” (p. 165).

As I previously insisted, the speaker-centered speech act theory cannot capture the complexity of the speech act in dialogical communication. In dialogue, it is highly possible that the illocutionary act might mean different things to the listener or the second person, no matter what the speaker intends. The two aforementioned cases, the talk about folk and that of a woman, have exemplified this point. In these cases, there remain only facts that the wife took the folk for the husband and that Mary perceived John’s utterance to be an indication
that he is interested in a woman. In order to identify illocutionary acts, only resources available to make inference are how such factual events or actual effects, which are perlocutionary acts that occur as a result of the speaker’s utterance, are conceived to each participant. The meaning of illocutionary acts can be described only through the internal reality of these facts in participants and through the direct dialogue with them. In other words, it is *a posteriori* that the meaning of illocutionary act can be confirmed.

In total, the identification of illocutionary act follows a similar procedure of phenomenological reduction or *epoché*. It means that “all assumptions about nature and empirical phenomena, all being, in brief all reality, must be placed into parenthesis, must be set aside as if it were an irrelevant function in experience” (Pilotta & Mickunas, 1990, p. 11). Without assuming the external reality, Husserl (1964) attempts to seek the essence that cannot be reduced any longer. Also in the dialogical communication, it should be recognized that an attempt to make inference of illocutionary acts starts from perlocutionary acts because no direct access to speaker's intention can be presupposed. In fact, the logic of the traditional Speech Act Theory that illustrates what is said (locutionary act), what is intended to say (illocutionary act), and what happens by saying it (perlocutionary act) should be reversed.

As far as the otherness that resides among participants is a principle of dialogical communication, even research activities are no exception and this principle must be extended to the research context. For, researchers are human agents who make inference in their research by observing the phenomenon as the third person. In the sense that the study of human and society involves the study of interpretation of the being who interprets, Giddens (1993) calls the study of human and society “double hermeneutic.” If the researcher him or herself maintains the adherence to the speaker-centered meaning, he or she ends up in the active involvement in supporting the speaker to maintain the ownership to determine the meaning, by employing the Speech Act Theory. In this sense, researchers must rigorously hold this underlying process in the research as dialogical communication. Figure 4 epitomizes such decentralized speech acts and its research process. Even though the model still might have much room to be revised, it captures the overall image of the decentralized meaning of speech acts and the relationship to research activities. Particularly, indices on the circle line in the figure emphasizes the process of “double hermeneutic,” researchers’ intersubjective sense-making activities of the dialogical process of speech act.

**CONCLUSION**

The present paper has examined Austin’s Speech Act Theory. After reviewing the outlook on the theory, I clarified that the Use Theory of Meaning contributes to critique the failure of the referential theory of meaning. Focusing on the distinction between illocution and perlocution based on the concept of convention, I delineated Grice and Strawson’s critique to Austin’s convention in terms of intention. My main critique of the Speech Act Theory
revealed that the theory employs the speaker-centered model of meaning in communication when the meaning of acts is conceptualized. As a result, the listener's meaning and the multiplicity of interpretations are downgraded although they indicate the dialogical nature of communication. Consequently, I articulated two other problems that result from the decentralization of meaning in the context of dialogue. One is related to the ontology of convention. I urged that convention is not a necessary condition for the illocutionary act to be performed. However, when the speaker in him or herself exhibits a clear intention, convention is involved, whereas the listener requires convention to interpret the illocution of the speaker. In such a case, yet, convention is not a static but dynamic construct realized and reproduced by the use of language. The other problem is concerned with epistemology. An indubitable fact is that no one but speaker can access the meaning of the illocutionary act executed by the speaker. I insisted that the illocutionary act could be identified only *a posteriori* on the base of the meaning of the perlocutionary act in each participant of communication. This principle should be applied to the research setting because researchers surely make inference of speech acts performed by participants in the observing communication phenomenon.

![Figure 4: Decentralized Speech Act Theory and Research Process](image)

The current paper is still preliminary in the sense that it does not provide the solid outline of the conceptual framework of Speech Act Theory after the revision. The critique that I conducted only articulates some important aspects that will help revise the Speech Act Theory afterward. Nevertheless, the critique also implies that it can open a new possibility of the Speech Act Theory. Regarding convention, for instance, it is the force of speech acts that realizes such a dynamic social convention, not vice versa. Indeed, Austin uses the term “force” to describe the characteristic of illocutionary act, coining the term “illocutionary force.” This indicates that language use always executes a force to the world. Human agents not only exercise an illocutionary act by following conventions but also reproduce or even transform conventions throughout linguistic actions. In this way, Speech Act Theory will open a new horizon to contribute to the analysis on the production, reproduction and transformation of
social conventions. There is also a case that the structure of convention changes throughout time. The dynamic change, e.g., observed as different use of language among generations, is actualized through actions of human agents. The revised speech act theory will be able to contribute to the examination of this dynamics.

To conclude, I would like to do a little sociology on theories in social science. I contend that social scientific theories are often swallowed by the social trend. The ego-centered tendency of Speech Act Theory reflects the current trend of the modernistic consciousness of our age. In the sense that the theory mirrors the sensitivity of the times, indeed, consumers of such theories tend to perceive a sense of reality in theory. It is often the case, nevertheless, that the theory constructed as such in fact diminishes humanity and existential reality. For instance, the dialogical nature of communication is substituted to the monological view of communication, the live usage of language in a specific context is replaced by the abstracted rule in vain, and the dynamics of convention, language, and meaning is superseded with the statics. As the latters all indicate the characteristics of not human but machine, theory is rendered a mere product of social engineering. Originally, social science, literally the science on society, is supposed to seek the universal principle (“universal” not in a positivistic sense that tends to promote this social engineering) that explains society that humans construct. To avoid communication studies overemphasizing a certain worldview, e.g., celebrating the authority of the speaker and downgrading the agency of the listener, the consistent effort is to be made to retrieve humanity from technology. By critiquing Austin's Speech Act Theory, assuming that I implemented it in a constructive manner, the present paper aims to be one of such practices.

REFERENCES


